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SUBJECT: IN ISTANBUL ELECTIONS, AKP SETS ITS SIGHTS ON A  
CHP STRONGHOLD

REF: ANKARA 1993

¶1. Summary. Besiktas, one of Istanbul's richest and most secular districts, has long been a stronghold of Turkey's secular Republican People's Party (CHP). In both the 2004 local elections and the 2007 parliamentary elections Turkey's ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) never got above 20 percent of the district's vote. Intending to make inroads, AKP has appointed Bulent Gokcen, a rising young star of the party, as its district chair. In a recent interview, Gokcen claimed that, with a bit of luck, in the March 2009 local elections AKP could win the district, and set forth in detail how he intends to do so. We have our doubts. End Summary.

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AKP's New Focus on Besiktas  
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¶2. The city of Istanbul consists of 39 districts, 33 of which have their own mayor and district council. (The remaining six districts have been recently created and will select their first representatives in the March, 2009 local elections.) Istanbul politics have been dominated by AKP for over a decade, since the time that prime minister Tayyip Erdogan was mayor. Currently, 27 of the 33 pre-existing districts have mayors from AKP, four from CHP, and 1 from the Motherland Party. The mayor of one district, Sisli, is independent, but formerly belonged to CHP.

¶3. Besiktas, located directly south of the district in which the Consulate General is located, is one of Istanbul's smallest districts, with a population of about 200,000 (including the Consul General and many Consulate families). It is also one of Istanbul's prime commercial locations, and during the day some 3 million people commute to work in its many high rise office buildings, reminiscent of New York City. Indeed, Besiktas is a sister city to Brooklyn, and was visited by Brooklyn's mayor earlier this year.

¶4. Affluent Besiktas has long been a stronghold of CHP. Neither in the 2004 local elections nor in the 2007 parliamentary elections was AKP able to garner as much as 20 percent of the vote. In fact, in both the 2004 local elections and the 2007 parliamentary elections AKP received a smaller percentage of the votes in Besiktas than in any other district in Istanbul. Last year, Erdogan appointed Bulent Gokcen, a rising young star of the party, as AKP's Besiktas district president. Gokcen is 35 years old, a frequent vacationer in the U.S., and an attorney with an intellectual property and unfair competition practice. (He said that he had personally registered AKP's "lightbulb" logo.) He has been a member of AKP for seven years, and previously held several different jobs at the provincial level of the party.

Gokcen told us that Erdogan is giving much importance to elections in the district because of its high profile.

¶5. We met Gokcen in AKP's year-old district office in the heart of Besiktas. Of the 20-30 people who work at the office, only four low-level staffers are paid; all the rest (including Gokcen) are volunteers. The office includes three private interview rooms for citizen services (each staffed all day, serving daily about 100 constituents), two conference rooms, and a small auditorium. Gokcen said it was an example of the latest design standard in AKP district offices.

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AKP's Two-Pronged Strategy for Besiktas  
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¶6. We asked Gokcen how AKP, whose base is composed of mostly poor, conservative and religious voters, could hope to compete in Besiktas. Gokcen replied that about a quarter of Besiktas' residents are lower middle class, and many of them are Alevis. He said that AKP intends to reach out to this group (ref), and that one of its campaign promises would be to enact legislation that allows Alevis to build a worship house (cemevi) -- a promise that, Gokcen claimed, current Besiktas CHP mayor Ismail Unal once made but never fulfilled.

¶7. Gokcen further said that AKP would compete by reaching out beyond its base to convince Besiktas' affluent, secular voters that AKP does not have a hidden agenda, is not against Kemalist principles, and is not seeking to implement sharia law. As evidence of AKP's ability to get this message across, Gokcen pointed to the 2007 parliamentary elections, in which, according to his analysis, 64 percent of the people who voted

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for AKP were "modern."

¶8. Gokcen also noted that in local elections the personalities of the candidates are very important, since voters prefer a candidate who resembles them and is approachable. (Comment: We have heard this from most other politicians, of various persuasions. End Comment.) He claimed that the current mayor, Unal, has the reputation of being remote (Unal's popularity in Besiktas trails that of CHP as a whole), and said that AKP's "Number 1 promise" will be "a mayor who is approachable."

¶9. Gokcen is convinced he possesses these qualities, and works hard to keep himself in the public eye. He recently appeared in a three-page spread in the September edition of "VIP Etiler," a large, glossy magazine devoted to the doings of Besiktas' well-to-do. Photographed in pressed jeans, an open neck dress shirt and blue blazer, with his attractive (and unscarfed) wife and baby by his side, he is the model of a modern, secular Turk. Indeed, he says he comes from the "modernist" wing of AKP, and calls himself "both religious and an Ataturkist." He says that what attracted him to AKP was its ability to respect tradition while working for a better future.

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AKP's Permanent Campaign  
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¶10. While Gokcen would seem to be the perfect candidate for mayor, he said that he hasn't decided whether he will seek that job (which would require him to resign his current position), and emphasized that the final decision would be up to Erdogan. When asked when AKP would begin to campaign, he laughed and said that the party was permanently in campaign mode. His local organization consists of 12 deputy chairs, 23 neighborhood chairs, who each also have 12 deputies, 488 "ballot box chairs," and 5,000 other volunteers (90% of whom Gokcen himself has recruited).

¶11. The duties of the ballot box chairs illustrate the depth of preparation that AKP puts into its campaigns. Besiktas has a total of 488 "ballot boxes" (i.e., voting stations). Each AKP ballot box chair is responsible for campaigning in the area covered by his or her voting station. Since Besiktas

has 146,000 registered voters, each ballot box chair is responsible for 300-400 potential voters -- and, armed with a laptop computer containing voter lists, is expected to contact each and every one of those voters in advance of the election. Further, should a supporter not show up on election day, the chair will contact that person to remind him or her to vote. Gokcen acknowledged that such a 100 percent "reachout rate" was unusually high, and said that throughout Istanbul the overall rate was only about 50 percent -- still impressive, given Istanbul's 12 million plus population.

¶12. Gokcen, like other AKP officials we have interviewed, emphasized the centrality to AKP's campaign strategy of such "reachout" (designed by Erdogan when he was mayor of greater Istanbul) and also noted CHP's incompetence at it. According to Gokcen, CHP politicians simply do not have the right "frequency" to bond with people. Even though he is not a declared candidate, Gokcen said that in his capacity as district president he intends to visit with the shops and residents of every street in Besiktas -- a task that is already 50 percent complete. During the month of Ramadan, the Besiktas party served 5,000 iftar meals per day, and held a concert every other day. Other campaign tactics will include extensive Internet use and brochure handouts by AKP's army of volunteers. In formulating his strategies, Gokcen has for the last ten months had the luxury of monthly poll data, since one of his deputies owns a polling firm. (Normally, AKP polls once every three months.)

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AKP's Expectations for the Future  
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¶1. Gokcen recognizes it is unlikely that AKP can overtake CHP in the upcoming elections, at least not without some help: If the Democratic Left Party runs a strong candidate, he said, it may split the leftist vote with CHP, thus permitting AKP to squeak in. However, Gokcen's goal in these elections is not so much to win the mayorship as to develop a strong party organization for the future, while increasing AKP's share of the vote by 50 percent, so as to make it a

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significant force on the council (where it currently holds only 5 of 30 seats).

¶14. Comment. There does appear to be opportunity for AKP to improve its position in Besiktas. Sisli -- the district directly to the south of Besiktas -- has a similar population and demographic profile, and in the 2007 parliamentary elections AKP's support in Sisli was 75 percent higher than in Besiktas -- indicating that poor party organization adversely affected AKP's results in Besiktas. Thus, Gokcen's goal of a 50 percent increase in AKP support (to 27 percent) may not be far-fetched. However, in the 2007 elections CHP received 53 percent of the vote, and the majority of any increase in AKP's support is more likely to come at the expense of the various minor parties on the ballot rather than CHP. At the end of the day, under any reasonable scenario AKP will still trail far behind CHP. For Gokcen the real prize in the upcoming elections is more likely to be the burnishing of his reputation as an up-and-comer than control of the Besiktas municipal government. End Comment.

WIENER